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Commentary on Hall

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Commentary on: P. Courtenay Hall's "The Limits of Critical Thinking"

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The first thing I do when talking to students, especially philosophy majors, is remind them that most of the world does not argue the way they do. With some exceptions, the general population does not enjoy having every statement and assumption laid out and queried, and they do not find that disagreement is something to welcome. Philosophers, especially young ones, immensely enjoy the repartee, back and forth, clash and counter clash of argument with an eye toward seeing which view in a Popperian world remains standing at the end. For them, to state something, to make an assertion and *not* have it questioned, is to be ignored, condescended to, or otherwise not taken seriously. When the professor, rather than examining or challenging a view simply says, Uh, huh, and moves on to the next raised hand, the student is crestfallen. But this is not the case outside of our philosophical aerie.

In the real world, people prefer agreement to disagreement, confirmation as opposed to questioning. The exception to this is in an *inquiry*, that argumentative context in which the people involved are determined to locate the truth, or, at least, carefully examine an approach or alternative. And it is here, in the context of an inquiry, or, as we might more coalescently put it, *in the context of that aspect of a disagreement that is inquiry based*, that critical thinking comes to the fore. Critical thinking is dedicated to locating the true, or (to be metaphysically looser) the acceptable. This, very goal of critical thinking, i.e., the careful examination and evaluation of arguments according to accepted rules of practice, is what its critics point to. The idea that the truth is something more or less objective, and, more, that the rules of evaluation for an argument are identifiable and can be exported to a wide variety of venues, is just what causes consternation.

Pam Courtenay Hall is quite aware of the difficulties and issues critical thinking raises among feminist and postcolonial theorists in its quest for the truth and its determination of the standards and techniques that *ought* be used in locating it. She does a fine job of isolating these difficulties and demonstrating their validity. Her thesis is that 1] these issues are important and must be considered; 2] there is nothing in the view called (TC)² developed by Bailin, Case, Coombs and Daniels that precludes extending the (TC)² approach to include feminist and postcolonial considerations; and 3] critical thinking as a discipline needs to broaden itself to take into account the wider political, social, and epistemological issues raised in educationally corrective theories.

I find myself in the happy difficulty of largely agreeing with Courtenay Hall's conclusions. For one thing, I am certainly on record (some would say far too much on record) as arguing that critical thinking is limited in its ability to treat arguers as individuals with needs, goals, and personalities (Gilbert 1995, 1997). In addition, I also believe that feminist theorists have compelling reasons for urging changes in the structure

and practice of critical thinking (Gilbert 1994). As a result, I will make three brief comments, and then bow out so as to permit discussion to begin.

My first comment, is that I do not believe it is all that easy to extend (TC)² so as to permit the flexibility and relativism required by feminist and postcolonial critics. The primary reason for this is the separation of the argument qua artifact, from the arguer qua situated person. So long as an argument is a metaphysical thing, something that can be removed from its context, examined and inspected, the evaluative rules which are then applied will also be independent of the core situated factors that vary from context to context. In her insightful commentary into my theory of Coalescent Argumentation, Sharon Bailin (2000) writes of the Critical-Logical [C-L] approach as follows.

C-L does indeed rest on the possibility of separating the argument from particular arguers in some sense, and this is a point clearly rejected in the coalescent approach. C-L assumes that there is an important distinction between arguments and the process of argumentation. Individuals deploy or construct arguments in particular contexts, but such arguments *are in some sense public products or artifacts* which exist within a dialectical tradition and form part of a public conversation. [Emphasis added.]

This indicates that a given argument, especially one in what might be called an inquiry, does not change with place and person, but is subject to analysis independent of who, what, why, and where. This is, I believe incompatible with the feminist and postcolonial concerns.

My second point follows upon the first. Critical thinking has an antipathy toward the idea of psychologism, by which I mean anything that brings the individual and that individual's goals, feelings, intentions and desires into the analysis of an argument. To be critical just means to avoid these aspects and rely upon cooler, more isolable, more observable aspects of an argument. Thus, the Pragma-Dialecticians require that everything considered in an argument be spoken, presented, or, at the least, enthymematically demanded (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984). Inquiries into why someone holds a position, how they feel about it, how they came to it are all ruled out of court in deciding the value of an argument or the worth of a claim. This I take to be directly opposed to a good deal of the criticisms leveled at critical thinking. Jagger, for example, writes: "Just as observation directs, shapes and partially defines emotions, so too emotion directs, shapes, and even partially defines observation" (Jagger 154). Consequently, failure to consider the emotional aspects of an argument entails failure to understand the dynamic relation between the judgements and values involved within it.

My third point is to suggest that there are views which will aid in structuring the concerns with which Courtenay Hall is working. Willard, for example, talks in *A Theory of Argumentation* of the need to understand rationality as malleable characteristic that has an anthropological aspect as well as a critical one. Courtenay Hall quotes a story about a native Indian student whose approach to his elders is not to be critical, but to listen to stories and take in what is offered. Similarly, when I teach writing I always explain to students that criticisms are to be heard, absorbed, and used for what they have to offer, and that one must separate the problem a critique identifies from the solution the critic offers. Never, I urge, argue with a critic. This is a difficult skill, but vitally important to

the creative process. Willard and I have been campaigning for some time to extend the limits of what is considered to be argument, of what is allowable and refused within the halls of critical thinking. Others, like Tindale similarly attempt to expand the borders to include the rhetorical notions that permeate our communications. Indeed, there is much to be garnered from the rhetorical tradition and, in particular, Perelman & Obrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric* and its use of audience ought to be taken into account.

Finally, I must say again that critical thinking is a valuable and vital exercise. I teach it, and when I do, I do so more or less classically, while at the same time introducing comments and disagreements with the traditional approach. So, yes, critical thinking is a valuable skill, and it needs to be taught. And, yes, being critical about critical thinking is very important. I urge us, with Courtenay Hall, to find more ways to expand and liberate critical thinking from being the iconic tool of a dominant hegemony, to serving as one of a broader set of instruments that aims first to understand, second to forge agreement, and only thirdly to critique according to set standards.

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